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Post 6-16-72

Meany, Kennedy Confer

A MYSTERIOUS meeting between President George Meany of the AFL-CIO and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy has planted a seed of hope, no matter how unrealistic, inside big labor that the dreaded but seemingly inevitable presidential nomination of Sen. George McGovern might yet be averted.

What was said between Meany and Kennedy at their meeting last month is shrouded in secrecy and conflicting reports. Nevertheless, word has circulated at AFL-CIO headquarters that Meany candidly asked Kennedy to run for President to stop McGovern and that, to Meany's amazement, Kennedy was noncommittal. This account has nourished wistful thinking among top labor leaders that McGovern can still be stopped.

The strange story reflects big labor's desperation more than political reality. Those closest to Kennedy are confident he has no intention to run for President, much less sabotage George McGovern.

Meany and close associates decided weeks ago that Kennedy was the only alternative to McGovern. Although last year Meany was complaining privately about Kennedy's militant opposition to the Vietnam war, he now regards him as vastly preferable to McGovern, who would be the first Democratic presidential candidate since the 1920s without intimate ties to organized labor.

There is no proof this was actually discussed between Kennedy and Meany. Indeed, Meany's top aides, out of ignorance or a desire for secrecy, deny knowledge of the meeting.

In fact, however, the meeting was held at Meany's request late in May. Sources close to Kennedy and Meany claim the discussion involved issues, with no mention of presidential politics—a most improbable omission. However, one knowledeable AFL-CIO staffer has written a memorandum which gives this account of the conversation:

Meany stressed to Kennedy that McGovern was totally unacceptable to big labor. If McGovern was nominated, he predicted a battle over whether the AFL-CIO would endorse him. But even if an endorsement were voted by the AFL-CIO Executive Council, he made clear that George Meany—and presumably Meany's major allies—would not work for McGovern against President Nixon.

ALTHOUGH the pivotal California Democratic primary was then two weeks away, Meany told Kennedy that he had lost hope of a second nomination for Sen. Hubert Humphrey, labor's choice against McGovern in the primary elections. Only Ted Kennedy could stop McGovern. Would he try

According to the memorandum, Kennedy did not say yes and did not say no. That account may be attributable to Kennedy's sometimes ambiguous articulation. In any event, Meany was pleasantly surprised that Kennedy did not reject his suggestion out of hand.

The report from the AFL-CIO staffer is that Meany confided this information to two key members of labor's inner circle—Lane Kirkland, AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer, and Joseph Beirne, president of the Communications Workers of America, enjoining strictest secrecy on both.

That top labor leaders look to Kennedy to stop McGovern tells much about their anti-McGovern sentiment. Kennedy shares most of McGovern's views on Vietnam, foreign policy and defense and space spending so strongly opposed by Meany and other labor leaders, many of them strongly and traditionally anti-Communist. There is little policy difference between Kennedy and McGovern.

Rather, the difference lies in personal relationships. Whereas big labor harbors grievances against McGovern dating back to the early 1960s, AFL-CIO contacts with Kennedy have been warm. So clearly is McGovern perceived as an enemy that some labor leaders believe four more years of Richard Nixon might be the lesser of two evils.

Not even Kennedy on the ticket as vice presidential nominee, devoutly desired by McGovern but persistently disavowed by Kennedy, would appease big labor.

Publishers-Hall Syndicate